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BELARUS: Imprisoned Catholic priest "Polish spy" or religious freedom victim?

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Belarusian officials have given no information about why the KGB secret police arrested Catholic priest Fr Vladislav Lazar on 31 May, Forum 18 News Service notes. He is being held in the KGB detention centre in the capital Minsk. Prison staff refused to allow a Bible, prayer book and rosary to be handed in for him. "We recently arrested one traitor who served in the special services [KGB] and who was connected with foreign states through representatives of the Catholic Church, and not only passed on information, but because of his activity people who work abroad suffered," President Aleksandr Lukashenko announced in July, giving no details. "Maybe tomorrow I'll disappear like this and my family will worry and have no information about my whereabouts," fellow Catholic priest Fr Yuri Barok told Forum 18.

More than three months after they arrested Catholic priest Fr Vladislav Lazar and imprisoned him in the KGB secret police detention centre in the capital Minsk, the Belarusian authorities have repeatedly refused to explain why he is being held. Although officials speak of a "Polish spy", no official charges have been filed against him, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Moreover, his defence lawyer, Pyotr Vendlinsky, has been given a gagging order which prevents him from disclosing any information in the case.

The 45-year-old Fr Lazar – born Vladimir Lazar – has been priest since mid-April of the Descent of the Holy Spirit parish in Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk Region.

All attempts to obtain official information have been in vain. Forum 18 called the KGB headquarters in Minsk on 2 September, but the press service refused to comment. On the same day Fr Yury Sanko, acting spokesperson for the Belarusian Catholic Bishops' Conference, told Forum 18 that he could not comment on the case since there was no official information.

Fr Sanko had told Radio Liberty on 29 July: "This case is being dealt with by governmental agencies and attended to by the Apostolic Nunciature to Belarus." However, the Apostolic Nunciature in Minsk, headed by nuncio Claudio Gugerotti, declined to answer Forum 18's questions on 3 September.

President accuses Catholic "representatives" of spying

On 26 July, eight weeks after Fr Lazar was arrested to be held incommunicado without any information being made public, President Aleksandr Lukashenko remarked on the arrest of a KGB secret police officer. "We recently arrested one traitor who served in the special services [KGB] and who was connected with foreign states through representatives of the Catholic Church, and not only passed on information, but because of his activity people who work abroad suffered," Lukashenko said in remarks posted on the Belta official news agency website. "How should this be characterised? From our point of view it is treason."

Lukashenko identified neither the foreign state he had in mind, nor the arrested KGB officer, nor the "representatives of the Catholic Church" he believed were also guilty of treason. However, the public widely linked Fr Lazar's arrest with his remarks. No other Catholic Church "representative" is known to have been arrested.

Lyubov Lunyova is a journalist of "Narodnaya Volya" (People's Will) newspaper who knows Fr Lazar and his family. "When Lukashenko commented about the Belarusian intelligence agent-traitor, it was not clear whether he meant that the agent was a spy and Vladislav Lazar turned out to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or whether the priest himself was a spy," she told Forum 18 on 2 September. She believes that were it just an ordinary spy case the public would have been told the details.

Situation "scares and astonishes people"

Fr Yuri Barok, a Catholic priest of Vitebsk diocese, has known Fr Lazar since the seminary in Grodno [Hrodna], where they studied together in the 1990s. "Parishioners are asking why the priest was detained," he complained to Forum 18 on 1 September. "But the Catholic Church on the official level doesn't give any comments or information, saying nothing or defending him. This is a strange situation which scares and astonishes people."

Fr Lazar's parishioners in Borisov wrote a petition to the authorities for his release.

Another parish priest in Borisov, Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, a Polish citizen, had his state permission for religious work in Belarus stopped at the end of December 2008. A religious affairs official for Minsk Region told him verbally that it was because of a Christian music festival. Officials ignored a petition by parishioners, with one official insisting: "The views of the parishioners are nothing to us" (see F18News 7 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1237).

Aleksei Shein, co-ordinator of a Christian movement which is campaigning for Fr Lazar's release, explained why this case should not be viewed as an ordinary one. "There is no official information; the charges have not been officially filed; he is kept in KGB prison which excludes the criminal nature," Shein commented to Forum 18 on 26 August.

On 1 August the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (an unregistered opposition party) posted a petition on the change.org website calling on the General Prosecutor's Office and the KGB to release Fr Lazar. "We believe that the arrest of the priest is an attempt to blackmail the Catholic Church and intimidate the Belarusian public," the petition maintains. "In this connection, we demand that Fr Vladislav Lazar be immediately released." As of 9 September, 3,207 individuals have signed the petition.

Shein informed Forum 18 that an appeal was also sent to Pope Francis.

Belarus Christian Democracy organised a round table in Minsk on 15 August to discuss Fr Lazar's case and write letters to international human rights organisations. "Belarus intelligentsia signed an appeal to the head of the KGB asking for Fr Lazar to be freed," Shein told Forum 18. "I don't understand why it can't be done."

At a 3 September "solidarity evening" in Minsk co-organised by the Christian Democracy Party, former Soviet-era political prisoner Vladimir Romanovsky – who heads the Minsk branch of the Memorial society – exclaimed: "How can you speak of spying in relation to a member of the clergy? This is a classic provocation."

Isolated in prison

Fr Lazar disappeared on 31 May after visiting his parents in the village of Konyukhi in Minsk Region. "His family worried so much and checked all the hospitals and morgues and then went to the police, which couldn't find him either," journalist Lunyova told Forum 18 on 2 September. Two weeks after his disappearance, his family got a short phone call from Fr Lazar telling them that he was alive.

Forum 18 reached Fr Lazar's sister Yanina on 3 September looking for more details, but she declined to talk. She told Belsat in early August that since her brother's arrest, family members had been shadowed and "controlled severely" by police.

Only at the beginning of August was the family allowed to pass Fr Lazar a parcel in the KGB detention centre. Lunyova remarked that neither the Bible, nor prayer book, nor rosary was allowed. "They took only personal hygienic items and after long discussions and scrutiny a squared notebook was accepted," she told Forum 18.

There is no information if Father Lazar has access to fellow clergy. The KGB detention centre is known for its strict isolation rules. Pavel Severinets and other opposition activists detained after the President elections in 2008 know from their own experience that religious literature in the Russian language is available for sale only in the prison bookstore and visits by clergy are allowed only if approved by the authorities (see F18News 4 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1589).

Why the arrest?

After graduating from Grodno seminary, Fr Lazar took a theology course in Poland. He served as a priest in Rudensk and then Maryina Gorka before being transferred to Borisov to head one of the three Catholic parishes in the town. There he had plans to build a church to replace the current old chapel.

Fr Lazar is characterised by his colleague Fr Barok and the journalist Lunyova who attended his services as a kind and unselfish person who was respected by his parishioners. "He is the best of the best, serving God," Lunyova insisted to Forum 18.

She noted that Maryina Gorka is a specific place inhabited by retired KGB officers and after serving only a year, Fr Lazar gave First Holy Communion to 38 children. Fr Barok told Forum 18 that Fr Lazar is a good preacher and many people came to listen to him.

Asked if he considers it possible that other Catholic clergy could face similar arrest and enforced disappearance, Fr Barok remarked that there is no safety guarantee. "Maybe tomorrow I'll disappear like this and my family will worry and have no information about my whereabouts," he told Forum 18.

Orthodox receive instructions

At the same 26 July meeting with journalists, President Lukashenko also said he believes the Orthodox Church (which he described as "our Church") is in need of reform, "and maybe not only the Orthodox". He particularly highlighted the language of services (the Russian Orthodox Church uses Old Church Slavonic rather than Belarusian or Russian) and their length (Orthodox churches do not have seats).

"Very long and lengthy are prayers, services and sermons, and the elderly generation, many old women, simply can't endure it," he insisted. "They should be more brief, compact, contemporary. I'm against making people stand in church for two or three hours for sermons or prayers with nowhere to sit down."

Lukashenko also criticised the building of "grandiose churches", insisting they should be "comfortable, temples for the soul that do not overwhelm the individual".

Although he stressed that he was giving his "personal opinion", Christian Democracy activists pointed out that Lukashenko made his remarks at the same time as accusing "representatives of the Catholic Church" of being involved in spying. They believe he might be issuing a warning to two of Belarus' biggest religious communities.

Homeless shelter registered, but criminal case continues

Meanwhile, the criminal investigation continues of Aleksei Shchedrov, a young Catholic layman who turned his home, in the village of Aleksandrovka in the western Grodno [Hrodna] Region, into a shelter for homeless people. He is being investigated under Criminal Code Article 193-1. This punishes "organisation of or participation in activity by an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation" with a fine, or imprisonment for up to two years.

The investigation – filed against Shchedrov in June – is being led by the Shchuchin District Investigative Committee, which is headed by Ivan Novikov.

The authorities – who raided his shelter twice – dislike the fact that he turned one of the rooms into a chapel and made religious literature available. Shchedrov expressed high expectations to Forum 18 in mid-August about registration, hoping that this would result in the closure of the criminal case (see F18News 2 July 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1853).

Forum 18 has learnt that the authorities have officially registered Shchedrov's shelter as a social care institution. Forum 18 was unable to reach Shchedrov between 5 and 8 September.

Dina Shavtsova, a Minsk-based lawyer and human right activist who helped Shchedrov with the registration, pointed out to Forum 18 on 5 September that the criminal charges cannot be dropped automatically.

This was confirmed by the deputy head of the local police public order department Vladimir Vazovsky. "The violation was registered at the moment when Shchedrov had no registration," he explained to Forum 18 on 9 September. "However, the registration he has now doesn't indicate that this institution is based in Aleksandrovka village."

Asked under what circumstances the criminal case would be closed, he directed Forum 18 to Novikov of the Investigative Committee. However, his phone was engaged or went unanswered each time Forum 18 tried to reach him on 9 September.

Asked if the shelter residents jeopardise public order, Vazovsky said no conflicts had occurred since the shelter was opened. "However, the village residents are under constant pressure since they don't know when something will happen, you know what kind of contingent [shelter inhabitants] it is," he claimed to Forum 18. (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1796.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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